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ABSTRACT

Icelanders are a highly literate people, their culture tied together by perhaps the most complete written tradition of any modern nation. No wonder, then, that the tiny island country seemed in no rush to develop a television broadcasting system. Indeed, it is questionable whether television would have been in demand at all if not for outside influences. Of course, eventually it would have, since Iceland, though isolated and homogeneous, is a modern society. Yet in many ways television in Iceland developed as a reaction to the presence of a United States controlled broadcast facility. Preservation of a unique and treasured way of life brought about both the condemnation of television and its development. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (Author/MM)

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Broadcasting in Iceland:
Cultural Protectionism and U.S. Influence

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Broadcasting in Iceland:
Cultural Protectionism & U.S. Influence

Icelanders are a highly literate people, their culture tied together by perhaps the most complete written tradition of any modern nation. No wonder then, that the tiny island country seemed in no rush to develop a television broadcasting system. Indeed, one wonders whether television would have been in demand at all if not for outside influences. Of course, eventually it would have, since Iceland, though isolated and amazingly homogeneous, is a modern society. Yet, in many ways television in this country developed as a reaction to the presence of a United States controlled broadcast facility. Preservation of a unique and treasured way of life brought about both the condemnation of television (foreign) and its development (domestic).

Communicative Tradition

Although we may rarely hear *from* the Icelanders (notable exceptions: Reagan/Gorbachev summit, Fischer/Spassky chess match, Cod Wars), communication is very important to these children of the Vikings. Their written history dates back to the founding of the society in the 900s AD. Originally presented through oral tradition the somewhat fictionalized literary *Sagas* are well known to every citizen. They provide a strong cultural bond for this, the most literate (99.9%) people in the world (Wilentz, 1986). "In Iceland, literacy is almost universal, bookstores are

numerous and books are mandatory Christmas gifts. While Iceland is a modern nation, the pull of traditional culture is still strong. Even today there is widespread belief in elves" ("Iceland: Proud," 1986, p. A10).

Haraldur J. Hamar dubs Iceland a "nation of newspaper addicts" (1981, p. 46). There are five daily newspapers published in the capital city of Reykjavik (Horton, 1983), and the per capita circulation figures of most would make the New York Times green with envy. Over 80% of the citizens in the capital city read Morgunbladid, the country's leading paper, every day (Hamar, 1981). Over 70% of 16 to 19 year-olds in the whole country read Morgunbladid [Morning paper]. This publication represents the interests of the nation's largest political party, the Independence Party. Three other dailies are also politically affiliated: Timinn [The Times], Alpydubladid [The people's paper], and Pjodviljinn [The people's will]. The fifth daily newspaper, Dagbladid [Daily paper] is independent. In a city of 86,000 and a country of 240,000 total population, the circulation figures are impressive:

Morgunbladid	43,000	Timinn	17,000
Dagbladid	30,000 or more		
Pjodviljinn	12,000	Alpydubladid	5,000

(Horton, 1983, p.286-287).

If Morgunbladid's per capita circulation could be matched by an American newspaper, it would mean over 40 million copies per day (Hamar, 1981). There are a surprising number of popular weekly newspapers and

magazines in Iceland as well.

Development of Broadcasting

Radio broadcasting has a strong history in Iceland. The State Broadcasting Service was developed in 1930 to operate a nationwide radio service. The first station's signal reached as far as the outskirts of Reykjavik, and repeaters were built to take the signal throughout the island (Directory of Iceland, 1970). This first service offered (and still offers) a great deal of news, talk programs, lectures, discussion forums and classical music (Griffiths, 1969). A second state radio station now offers primarily "light" or popular music (Antonnson, 1987).

Icelandic television began operation in 1966, but many citizens were already watching the tube, courtesy of NATO. On the air base at Keflavik, U.S. military personnel were provided with television as well as radio programming from home (Magnusson, 1977). The assignment to Iceland, considered hardship duty by many American soldiers, was softened by the availability of popular entertainment from the States. To the chagrin of some Icelandic officials, many of the locals found American television entertaining as well. Though the television station at Keflavik began operation in 1955, it was not until 1961 that it really raised the ire of many Icelanders. That was the year the station boosted its power enough to be received in much of southwestern Iceland -- where most of the population is concentrated. "The result was that more than half of the citizenry could watch television if they so wished" (Antonsson, 1979).

Even though Icelandic officials had approved the power increase, the ensuing controversy, according to Icelandic State Broadcasting Service General Director, Markus Antonsson, probably hastened the development of domestic television by five years or more. The stronger signal "irritated many leading figures in cultural life and mostly those who were already critical of NATO forces" (1987). Certainly the military base at Keflavik was already a sensitive political issue ("Iceland: Proud, isolated"). Antonsson points out however, that the television situation was one which brought criticism from elements who had otherwise been favorable to and positive about the presence of the American forces (1987).

The acrimony should not be surprising since Iceland has a longstanding commitment to and policy of preserving and protecting Her homogeneity and cultural traditions, especially in the areas of language and literature. Their success in this endeavor can be attributed partially to the nation's remote, isolated location (and some would say -- disposition).

> The tongue Icelanders speak is almost identicle to the one their ancestors spoke 1000 years ago [Old Norse]. . . There has been almost no immigration for 800 years. Iceland had its first death from AIDS in 1985 and its first armed robbery in 1984. . . [Quoting Baldur Jonsson, Chairman of the Icelandic Language Committee] "We are very concerned about preserving our traditions because we are so small." ("One man struggles..." 1986, p. 27).

Thorolfur Thorlindsson has described Icelanders as having a tendency to

"value ideas that support their uniqueness and disregard those that do not. . . . a culture characterized by conformity and ridicule" (1982, p. 80). It's probably too simplistic to attribute the Icelanders' resistance to American television programming to a nationalistic stand-offishness. This is especially obvious when one realizes just how hungry Icelanders generally are for news and information, both foreign and domestic (Hamar, 1981). Sigurdur Magnusson writes about the bitter controversy:

> The country's intellectuals were in the forefront attacking this flagrant breach of existing laws and the opening up of a whole society to a very one-sided foreign influence. This had nothing to do with isolationism, as many of the propagandists for the army station maintained, but rather a demand for more variety in foreign influences and a protest against the outrageous fact that such an undeniably potent manipulator of public opinion as television should be run by a foreign military power within the country, but outside Icelandic laws and regulations (1977, p. 149).

If Icelandic intellectuals were fearful of the cultural and societal impact of American television's influence, their officials knew how to take advantage of it's popularity, and the growing nationalism on this issue. The State raised funds from an import duty on television sets bought to view the American programs. The money was used to develop an Icelandic State Television Service. The best response to foreign television was domestic television, according to a special commission

report, filed in 1964 (Antonsson, 1979). Not everyone agreed of course. John Griffiths wrote in 1969:

> Indeed it was these same transmissions [American] which led many vehemently to oppose the introduction of a domestic service on the grounds that the influence of the American television transmissions were pernicious and any extension of the audience by whomsoever served, would only be moreso (p. 168).

I.T.S. began broadcasting on the evening of September 30, 1966. It's birth was awaited with anticipation, "there was hardly a pedestrian around in Reykjavik, and car traffic had virtually ceased, . . . " and yet even with the substantial economic impetus of the import duties, and technical assistance from the Nordic countries and Great Britain, many were skeptical of television's future in Iceland. "The period of gestation had been short so a stillbirth could not be ruled out. And in all fairness, the decision-making and planning behind Iceland's television system had little in common with the tested procedures known from larger countries" (Antonsson, 1979, p. 17). The service survived, and grew. Today, virtually everyone in Iceland can receive state television and radio.

In 1986 Iceland's laws were rewritten to end the state monopoly on television, and make licenses available to private individuals, groups or companies (Icelandic) with no cap on the number of licenses available. (Bjarnason, 1987). Today there is one such private radio and one private television station in operation. Unlike "Radio One", "Radio Two" and the

Icelandic Television Service, the private stations' signals do not span the island nation. Their audience is primarily the capital region of Reykjavik and surrounding communities. Still, this means that Icelandic Radio Company and Icelandic Television Company programs are available to over 62% of the total population (Antonsson, 1987). The State service maintains 139 transmitters throughout the country and broadcasts short -wave programs to Icelandic ships.

Television programming on the military base at Keflavik has been converted to a closed-circuit system.

Structure and Policy

Absolute freedom of speech and the press are guaranteed in Iceland's constitution, and the citizens are proud of a tradition of promoting open discussion and broad participation in debates on important issues (Antonsson, 1987). The structure of the domestic broadcasting system, though a government monopoly for most of its history, was set up, in large part, to insure fair representation.

The State Broadcasting Service (RUV) exists within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Education. The General Director is appointed by the President. Three Managers -- of Finance, Television, and Radio, are appointed by the Minister of Culture and Education. There is also a seven-member Broadcasting Council, elected by the Althing (world's oldest parliament). The membership of this Council is divided proportionately between the political parties, and its Chair is appointed by the Minister of

Culture and Education (Magnusson, 1977). General Director Antonsson explains that the Radio Council "looks after" programming and discusses controversial issues, insuring equal opportunity and impartiality (1987). Antonsson says there is no rule or provision requiring or limiting discussion of controversial issues over the air, nothing comparable to the Fairness Doctrine in the United States. In practice, "complete impartiality in politics, public debates and disputes, opinions, faiths and sects, associations and individuals is the working rule of the State Broadcasting Service" (Magnusson, 1977, p. 150). Of course, observation of such a rule can itself limit open and serious discussion. The radio service's persistent impartiality has "given rise to considerable outbursts of public indignation at such times of high national feeling as the fishing disputes when it gave the British as well as the Icelandic point of view" (Griffiths, 1969, p. 123).

Licenses for private stations are granted by the seven-member Broadcasting License Committee, and that body does not primarily sit to make editorial decisions. Instead, in matters of programming, the attitude is one of "waiting to see if there are any complaints" (Antonsson, 1987). The original intent of licensing provisions are for stations to be local, and community-specific. However, Mr. Antonsson indicates that these guidelines have been loosely interpreted, and it would likely be quite easy to receive a license for setting up a single broadcast system or "network" capable of covering all of Iceland.

Broadcasting in Iceland depends on an interesting mix of economic support. There is advertising on Icelandic radio and television, but it is limited, and only allowed at specific times during the broadcast day, "never as time-out during shows" (Antonsson, 1979, p. 20). Advertising rates are subject to government approval. About 15 percent of the funding for the TV system comes from advertising, with another 75 percent coming from license fees. The current license fee, which covers both radio and television sets, is about $150 per household in 1987 (Bjarnason). License fees are easy to enforce since dealers notify the broadcast authorities of every set sold (Magnusson, 1977). Import duties are still collected to maintain the national networking system. (Antonsson, 1979).

Private broadcasting in Iceland is advertiser-supported, but the private television system has implemented an economic mix of its own. From 6 to 9 p.m. in the evening it is open-air, advertiser supported, but at 9 p.m. it switches to a scrambled, STV service requiring decoder rental and a subscription fee for the premium service.

Advertising, both newspaper and print is censored in Iceland. Items that may not be advertised include medicines, cigarettes and alcoholic drinks. "Advertisements containing propaganda or biased comparisons between commodities or other articles for sale are forbidden. So are notices about the contents of political papers and meetings" (Magnusson, 1977, p. 150).

Programming

Programming on the private radio station has been typified by popular music, much of it via a European satellite syndicated service called "Music Box." Radio One has a tradition of being the "serious" State station, providing very popular and extensive news coverage, discussions of current affairs and social matters, talk and magazine programs and classical music. "The Icelanders do not object at all to lengthy lectures. Such programs, intended for all those who wish to enrich their knowledge, are among the most popular " (Emery, 1969, p. 184). Radio Two competes fairly straight on with the private station, offering mostly "light" music. (Antonsson, 1987).

Most of the programming found on Icelandic television is foreign-produced. The United States and Great Britain are the major program suppliers. There is virtually no non-news local programming originated on the private station, but the State service has substantially increased its domestically produced fare over the past few years. In 1986 about 65% of all TV programming on ITS was from elsewhere, now Icelandic producers account for over 40% (Antonsson, 1987).

Both television services offer only evening and weekend programming. The State service has advanced from a modest schedule of two and one-half hours -- twice a week to six or seven hours per day -- every day. For much of its existence, Icelandic Television Service was known for its quaint custom of taking every Thursday off. ""If the rationale behind the arrangement stemmed from workshift considerations, it was soon realized

that setting one night a week for social activities was a good idea -- so Thursday evening became the natural time for scheduling meetings of all kinds" (Antonsson, 1979, p. 19). Although programs are now broadcast seven nights a week, year round (Bjarnason, 1987), until recently all television was suspended for the entire month of July so that all station personnel could vacation simultaneously. Popular foreign shows on Icelandic television include Nordic and British documentaries, and American sitcoms, dramas and mini-series. "BBC is the largest single source of programmes, and many of its serials have been extremely popular" (Antonsson, 1979, p. 21). Domestic production is primarily limited to news, documentary films, and assorted panel debates. Icelandic TV dramas are infrequent, and any television production of a work by a native playwright becomes the talk of the town and countryside, for a time at least" (Antonsson, 1979, p. 21). Live special event programs are also very popular in Iceland, now that two satellite earth stations enable reception. European soccer is especially well liked (Antonsson, 1987).

ITC, the private television station broadcasts typical British and American television programs in the early evening, but once scrambling begins, a "higher quality" of shows are made available including, according to Antonsson, "French movies and the like" (1981).

News is very popular on both broadcast media. "It is usual for adults to listen to three radio news broadcasts daily and watch the news programme on television" (Hamar, 1981, p.46). Both stations broadcast evening

newcasts. The State TV station carries international news from a European based satellite news service. Most of the international news passed on through any of the Icelandic media is from Great Britain or the United States.

> Thus the Icelandic public is in the strange position of being exceptionally well informed in international, political and economic affairs but of receiving, in the pop-star reporting and television soap opera, the very worst influences of Western cultural life (Griffiths, 1969, p. 168).

Initial surveys conducted by the Icelandic Union of Advertising Agencies in cooperation with SBS indicated that private radio surged ahead of State radio in listenership. As the novelty wore off, so did the lead, and though the private station is still ahead, "Radio Two" is competitive. State run television remains much more popular than the half-subscription service of the private ITC (Antonsson, 1987).

Access

Public access to the media is more of a tradition than a policy, according to General Director Antonsson (1987). He indicates there really is no need for such regulation (beyond constitutional guarantees) since it is Icelandic custom, and general practice to present representative views over the air.

The access tradition carries over from newspapers. With so many papers published, and such a small population of potential readers, it

would seem logistics require that many readers be directly involved in the publications. "The press' accessibility to everyone makes the papers a vehicle for the public to voice opinions and discuss matters, rather than to passively accept what a small, exclusive minority deems fit to print" (Hamar, 1981).

One vehicle for public access is as old as the State Broadcasting Service itself. Since 1930 a discussion program has aired on Monday evenings. The program title roughly translates to "The Day and the Way." The producers invite representatives from the various regions, professions, parties, etc. to talk about specific current issues. (Antonsson, 1987). The General Director points out that the Icelandic Television Service employs very few producers, and by purchasing most domestic programs from freelance sources, a sort of "access" is assured.

Government access, as might be expected, is a given on the State service. "The Althing has the unequivocal right to radio time whenever it pleases" (Magnusson, 1977, p. 150). Political debates are common on the radio service which John Griffiths characterizes as totally impartial, ensuring "approximately equal time to all parties" (1969, p. 107). Once, a candidate for the radio service's chief news editor was obliged to withdraw from the running due to public pressure. The complaint was that he was not "impartial enough" (Griffiths, 1969, p. 123).

Cultural Protectionism

The Icelanders share a unique and colorful past. Take for example, the

story of how the island was settled. In 874 when the seafaring Ingolf sighted land, he threw overboard his wooden high-seat pillars (carved much like totem poles). Where the pillars washed ashore, the Gods willed him to settle. They landed in a place that was later to become the nation's capital, Reykjavik. The people of Iceland are genuinely committed to preserving cultural traditions and a strong sense of history.

Certainly the relative isolation of Iceland has helped the nation maintain its cultural identity and the homgeneity of its people. But this is an age of shrinking distances, geographic location means less and less. Thorlindsson posits that "there are three broad characteristics of Icelandic society that influence almost everything in the country: its nationalism, the small size of the population, and its rapid industrialization and economic growth" (1982, p. 80). The first two, undoubtedly serve to buttress Icelanders' determination to preserve their way of life. If preservation is to be successful, however, many recent scholars (Smith, 1980, and Richstad & Anderson, 1981) warn us that it will be in spite of the latter characteristic -- since Iceland's rapid industrialization includes taking part in and avantage of changing telecommunications technology (Hamar, 1978).

That Iceland is a developed, modern, Western society is obvious. While covering the October, 1986 superpower summit, Roger Rosenblatt of Time magazine visited the ancient home of the Althing at Thingvellir to ponder Iceland's legacy of bloody confrontation, and balanced negotiation. The trek

to the chieftans' old meeting place was only after an evening at the underground "Broadway disco in Reykjavik [where he saw] an Icelandic rock group called Strax, led by a woman with her hair done up to look like a crow in flight, singing about U.S. and Soviet journalists vying for scoops" (1986, p. 25). Any comparison of Iceland with Third World countries such as those discussed by Katz & Wedell (1977) is probably a stretch. Per capita income is over $10,700, wealth is fairly evenly distributed, and the society is remarkably egalitarian. ("Iceland: Proud, isolated," 1986). Crime is low and violence, political or otherwise, is almost unheard of. Prime Minister Steingrimur Hermannsson swims four times a week at the public pool in Reykjavik and chats with the other swimmers -- his favorite form of public opinion poll, ("If nothing ever. . .," 1986).

Even so, some of the media inequities Masmoudi (in Richstad & Anderson, 1981) cites are relevant to Iceland's situation. The Icelandic people are not a major source of international news. They are consumers of, rather than participants in the major transnational news organizations. It takes a monumental occurence, or major disaster for the larger nations to dispatch journalists to the country. Iceland does not likely have prime reservations of orbit or spectrum space for satellite service. And what about cultural imperialism? Were the fears of unseemly American influence from Keflavik TV justified? "The effect of the American station was particularly apparent during the Viet Nam war, when only the official U.S. government views were presented" (Magnusson, 1977, p. 149).

Katz & Wedell (1977) tell us that developing countries are getting Western culture along with Western communications technology. Is Iceland in the same boat, receiving social and political propaganda from America, Great Britain and other communications/information giants? Or is Iceland somehow able to cope with outside influences and assimilate new ideas and new hardware into the native culture? If so, can Iceland serve as a model? This is probably too idealistic a view, for even though some said Icelanders would never take to American television, they now seem to have acquired a major thirst for foreign programming. In 1969 Griffiths predicted that "there will never be more than 30,000 sets or more than twenty to twenty-four hours of broadcasting a week." implying that U.S. and British television was basically undesirable (1969, p. 122).

Icelandic State Broadcasting Service's General Director says there is no restriction on the type or amount of foreign broadcast programming that can be put on the air. However, there is a translation requirement that serves to prevent broacasters from just turning on the switch and letting foreign programming flow in via satellite (Antonsson, 1987). Language preservation has long been Iceland's first line of cultural defense. "Though most Icelanders also speak English, the nation strongly resists the encroachment of foreign words into its native tongue, assigning them Icelandic names instead" ("If nothing happens . . .," 1986, p. A12). The Icelandic word for television is *sjonvarp* [viewcasting]. A computer is called a *tolva* and a telephone -- a *simi*. With a few

exceptions, broadcasters cannot broadcast anything which has not been either dubbed or subtitled in the Icelandic language. News, specials such as live major sporting events, and music are all exceptions (Antonsson, 1987). The translation requirement presumably gives State Broadcasting authorities ample opportunity to troubleshoot for undesireable programming, and requires private broadcasters to consider the worthiness and audience potential of every foreign offering in consideration. Since English is taught in the schools, and there is virtually no illiteracy in the nation, most of the translating is not necessary for viewer or listener understanding. The requirement is clearly for cultural preservation.

David Payne and Christy Peake (1967) found the presence of American television and subsequent development of domestic television in Iceland uniquely conducive to a testing of the "cultural imperialism" hypothesis. They found that for adolescent Icelanders, American TV had a

> minimal effect in generating favorable attitudes about the U.S., and no effect in increasing political information about the U.S., or in creating attitudes of fear, anger or sadness which Icelanders commonly associate with U.S. culture. . . . These data so suggest we might need to recognize the tenacity with which people hold on to their own cultures and limit the effects of nontechnological influence on them (pp. 530-531).

While Payne and Peake found no support for the cultural imperialism

hypothesis in Iceland, John Horton, (1983) indicates that "this conclusion would not pass unchallenged by many Icelanders." (p. 285).

Iceland remains a long way from most of the rest of us, out of sight and out of mind. But their hunger for information and affinity for all that modern media have to offer cannot help but shrink the distances and differences between this far northern tribe, and the rest of the Western world. Already live satellite radio and television transmission is commonplace on the island (Hamar, 1978). The country belongs to Intelsat and Eutelsat. Since the reduction of stiff use tarriffs, VCR sales are way up and videotape rental is a very popular entertainment pastime. Backyard satellite dishes are few, due to their high cost, but one can only speculate as to how fast their popularity will grow, as prices most likely drop. Icelanders may become unsatisfied with one or two channels -- available only in the evening and on weekends (Bjarnason, 1987).

In the past few years CATV (Cable) has sprung up in outlying communities much as it did in the United States in the 1950s. But in Iceland there is a modern twist. Originally a local entrepreneur might erect a tall antenna and simply feed the improved ITS signal to his neighbors, but this is the age of the VCR, and some cable systems are locating and "programming" their own tapes and films. Of course, as Markus Antonsson points out, this practice is not "strictly legal" (1987). Municipal authorities must grant permission for cable installment in their jurisdictions.

Iceland, home port of that funloving adventurer Leif Erikson, who discovered America five centuries before Columbus (and then lost it) remains an intriguing vacation spot, an important fishing power, and a rich source of history, literature and legend. In addition, it may prove to be a fertile macrocosm for media research (Dunn, Josepsson, & Wells, 1976) as the citizenry variously accept, assimilate, adapt to, utilize, and maybe even reject whatever intrusions drift, fly, fall upon or are beamed to their cherished homeland.

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